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# To the Editor

## 'Morality and Architecture'

Sir.—When one publishes a controversial book one expects to provoke varied responses but I am puzzled by the tremendous hostility of Reynier Banham in his review (February 17) of my *Morality and Architecture* since the objections he makes are so trivial. He begins by arguing that my claim that I have "no wish to question the value of the whole" of Pevsner's achievement is false. But he does not refer to my stated belief that no one since Ruskin has done more than Pevsner to open the eyes of the ordinary Englishman to his architectural heritage. I still maintain that recognition of that achievement is compatible with disagreement about much Pevsnerian ideology.

Banham complains that I accept Pevsner's view of Morris as a Luddite when, according to a recent *Duchamp* MA thesis, Morris can be made to appear pro-machine "by quotation no more selective than Pevsner's". I do not see that a great deal can be made to hang on this point, nor on his next one in which he implies that I am unaware of one of the most famous of modern architectural books, Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1949). I fail to see how reference to "a few telling pages on some heroic features" in this book would have seriously altered or strengthened my arguments.

Banham's next point concerns the interpretation of the use of glass in modern architecture. So far as I can see, we are probably in agreement about this. Then he attacks my passage on chocolate-brown patina, which he calls "a lot of people find it rather funny. He also disapproves of my use of the word 'prudent'; I shall be very happy to change this to 'desirable' in any future edition. In attacking me for mentioning that Pevsner used the word 'totalitarian' as a term of approval it is not clear whether it is because I am not the first to have done so or whether he thinks that the word does not have the grim implications generally ascribed to it. Nor will he allow any value in my pointing out that the word 'historicism' has been misused. My argument is that in Pevsnerian language 'historicism' and 'historicism' are always implicit value-judgments used to condemn without discussion nineteenth and twentieth-century architects who allow themselves to be influenced by tradition; to earlier architects like Alberti or Palladio, for example, the term is not applied. This constitutes misuse of a word which had been established by Pevsner and many others to mean something quite different.

My claim that Lutyens is one of the two or three greatest English architects Banham finds "preposterous". My impression is that Banham is probably now in a minority in maintaining this view and that we are in for a Lutyens revival.

These were, of course, limitations—some of which are sufficiently strange to suggest that a psychoanalytic investigation into them might prove amusing. Why, for example, did Ogden absolutely rule out the verb "I want"—surely the base of everything? We had to reach instead the phrase "I have a desire for" which is hardly English. I was in sympathy with trying to limit the vocabulary as much as possible, and in my case I used to cheat and add about another twenty words plus this vital verb. Otherwise one is forced to resort to very strange circumlocutions to get anywhere. The human body, for example, was almost as rudimentary as the verb-scheme. It seemed to me to be going too far when the only way of saying something like "milk-breasts" was to call them "milk-vessels". But these strange flaws aside, Basic English is a wonderful invention and should be revived and relunched.

LAWRENCE DURRELL  
c/o Curtis Brown, 1 Craven Hill,  
London W2 3EP.

## Among this week's contributors

JOHN BAYLEY's *An Essay on Hardy* was published last month.

Geoffrey Berr is the author of *Mid-Victorian Britain*, 1971.

JOHN BOARDMAN's recent books include *Athenian Red Figure Vases*, 1975 and *Intaglio and Rings*, 1975.

HIMMEL BULL is Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford.

PETER BURKE is the author of *Venice and Amsterdam*, 1974.

ARTHUR CALDER-MARSHALL's *The Two Duchesses* will be published next month.

W. E. CARNOGHAN's *Confinement and Flight* was published last year.

P. L. CARSTEN's *Racist Movements in Austria* was published in 1977.

ALICE CLARE CARTER is the author of *The Dutch Republic in Europe in the Seven Years War*, 1971.

These are really all the individual points which Banham makes, but they are so trivial that, whether justly made or not, they would in no way affect the argument of the book as a whole. What, then, is the cause of the passionate resentment which informs the whole review? The answer is perhaps found in the last section, where Banham argues that Pevsner must not be criticized because of his success as a stylistic talent-spotter. In the 1920s who predicted the success of the Modern Movement. But even if one accepted as valid such a historiographical technique, it is surely doubtful whether Pevsner did back the winners. There is now widespread revisionism against the ordinary Englishman in his architectural heritage. I still maintain that recognition of that achievement is compatible with disagreement about much Pevsnerian ideology.

D. J. WATKIN  
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## Basic English

Sir.—Reading your review of the C. K. Ogden memoir (February 17) gives me a chance to ask (once more) rather plaintively what on earth can have happened to Basic English, that brilliantly useful teaching tool which I used for some years on foreign students of all ages with ever-increasing admiration? As an analysis of the way English moves it is unsurpassed. Never have I made such quick progress in learning English unaided as I am sure that my students would agree today. I have made endless attempts, written numberless letters, to try and find myself copies of the *Orthological Institute's* publications, but in vain. There was an admirable Basic French and Italian based on the Ogden-Richards system of analysis. These should really be available today for foreigners wrestling with our tongue.

There were, of course, limitations—some of which are sufficiently strange to suggest that a psychoanalytic investigation into them might prove amusing. Why, for example, did Ogden absolutely rule out the verb "I want"—surely the base of everything? We had to reach instead the phrase "I have a desire for" which is hardly English. I was in sympathy with trying to limit the vocabulary as much as possible, and in my case I used to cheat and add about another twenty words plus this vital verb. Otherwise one is forced to resort to very strange circumlocutions to get anywhere. The human body, for example, was almost as rudimentary as the verb-scheme. It seemed to me to be going too far when the only way of saying something like "milk-breasts" was to call them "milk-vessels". But these strange flaws aside, Basic English is a wonderful invention and should be revived and relunched.

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## The Times Literary Supplement

We regret that for this issue of the TLS it has been necessary, for reasons outside editorial control, to hold over or curtail some reviews and regular features.

## A Blake Epigram

Sir.—David Erdman was wrong to suppose my hyphen unhappy (Letters, February 24). It can be quite happily, now that it has served its purpose. Her whole life is an Epigram, smacked-smooth and nobly peined. Platted quite neat to catch applause with a sliding noose at the end.

In quoting the epigram I introduced punctuation, expanded the contractions and modernized the spelling in accordance with the first form of OED headwords, to indicate Blake's vocabulary selections. Mr Erdman says "If we must punctuate, it would serve better to add a comma, as does Sir Geoffrey Keynes: smacked-smooth". But this smacks the point of my spelling (no punctuation), which was meant as the lightest hint likely to draw your readers' notice to Blake's selection of a different vocabulary item altogether from those in "smacked-smooth": namely, "smacked-smooth" is an image suitable in an advertisement for peanut butter, but a good colloquial word of Blake's time: see OED *smacked-smooth* (also *smack-smooth*): "perfectly smooth, level, or even with the surface"—as in Smollett's "Their faces smacked-smooth as if they had been clean shaven". Here "smacked-smooth" might be either an adjective qualifying "epigram", or, secondarily, an adverb modifying "peined" (in the sense "written"). There are several shades of distinction in this extraordinarily condensed poem. Besides the ambiguities Mr Erdman mentions there are of course others: "platted" can mean "braided" or "smoothed", and "peined" may not only mean "written" but also "enclosed"—a heraldic sense activated by "nobly". In view of such possibilities, I can easily understand someone arguing against the hyphen on the ground (not Mr Erdman's) that it might close off an ambiguity. That argument I should not resist. But to argue for a comma is to rob Blake of his chosen word.

This is not a bad instance of how the awe of accidentals can blind editors to an author's meaning. Of course old-spelling diplomatic texts are indispensable for evidential purposes. But modernizing the spelling tags—not least in obliging even the most confident editor to consult the dictionary. If I were editing the epigram, I should put "smacked-smooth" and add a note about "smacked-smooth". But no comma. No comma.

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# Seeing with wide eyes

By Robert A. Ferguson

ANDREW SINCLAIR:  
*Jack: A Biography of Jack London*  
312pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £6.95.

The early deaths of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London—all born in the 1870s—mark the greatest tragedy of a literary generation in American letters. Crane died of tuberculosis in 1900 at twenty-eight and a new friend, the elderly Henry James, mourned the loss of a "great, great genius". Two years later Norris's life ended in appendicitis. He was thirty-two, hard at work on the last volume of his "pic of the Wheat" trilogy, and full of plans for a new trilogy on the American Civil War. London died aged forty of an overdose of drugs in 1916. He was easily the most widely read American author of the day. The brief careers of these three literary naturalists give the novel of the period an oddly truncated quality. Their works, evoked by William Dean Howells' "Once let the tide of the long and regret" for what might have been. We are left with a series of brilliant but flawed examples: books that promise much, but fall just short of the first rank in terms of range and maturity.

This combination has left wide latitude for critical judgment. Ultimately, however, Crane and Norris have been measured by strengths held in common by all three writers, while London has been dismissed for alleged weaknesses. Crane, the master prose stylist of impressionism, and Norris, the father of American naturalism, have been given firm places in American literary history. London, the most versatile and prolific of the three, has become a lightly regarded author for boys and something of an intellectual curiosity. This controversial public life has made him a period piece for examining American ideological inconsistencies at the turn of the century. As recently as 1974, Earle Labor felt the need to argue defensively for London as a major figure in American literature. Now Andrew Sinclair's *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* offers new information on the writer's life and traces the many contradictions in London's thought that have undermined his reputation. London's life and work, these contradictions to demonstrate the complexity of a writer who could with equal conviction play the role of committed artist and literary hack.

Between 1900 and 1916 London wrote fifty books and a total of more than five hundred short stories published items. He prided himself on turning out a thousand words a day, six days a week, over his sixteen-year period. He discarded nothing. I have no un-finished stories," he explained. "I start. If it's good, I sign it and send it out. If it isn't good, I sign it and send it out." Typically, before Adam (1906), one of London's more popular novels, was written within just forty days. Such methods explain both the prodigious output of three books a year and the "lucrative mediocrity" that London candidly predicted for himself as early as 1899. His books, all products of haste, are marked by loosely constructed plots, secondary characterizations, and dramatic intensiveness, and artistic dialogue.

Even so, the London canon includes several dozen short stories of great power, three significant novels in *The Sea Wolf* (1904), *The Iron Heel* (1908), and *Martin Eden* (1909), and several ideological works of considerable interest and influence. Of the latter, *The People of the Abyss* (1903), his devastating study of slum life and urban poverty in the East End of London, and *George Washington* (1907), a polemic in Paris and London's *Down to Earth* (1907), while *The Road* (1907) is a polemic of London's early experience as a California hobo; such literature is an important model for writers as John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac. London's loss for many, but not for me, is a great one. His place on boxing have had a similar impact. His twelve articles leading

up to and including the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries 1910 heavyweight championship fight in Reno are impressive social documents and contain a careful defence of sports in literature to which King Learner, Ernest Hemingway, and Norman Mailer owe clear debts. London's coverage of a number of championship fights, along with such realistic boxing stories as "The Mexican" and "The Abyssmal Brute" and "A Piece of Steak" began a new genre in American fiction. Of course, any catalogue of London's important works must also include the phenomenally popular dog stories with their naturalistic stresses upon a more basic world and the Northern law of the club and fang. *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) have been translated into every major language and remain minor classics because of their unaffected simplicity and their intuitive use of myth.

London's best books are distinguished by their narrative power, their sharp imagery, and their sheer readability. Andrew Sinclair's new biography correctly traces this distinct, simple style and sense of pace to Rudyard Kipling, that master of the plain tale. London himself admitted the strength of the influence, acknowledging that "there is no end of Kipling in my work.... I would never possibly have been anywhere near the way I did had Kipling never been." The plain



Design by the American artist David Ward (b 1905), from *A Treasury of Bookplates*; see page 249 of this issue of the TLS.

rather abrupt style that both London and Stephen Crane applied to the adventure story was an important innovation in the general literary world of Victorian America. But London's real creative genius flowed from an uncanny ability to enfold a reader within the truth of his imaginative worlds. The special verisimilitude that he gave to his settings of base convulsion in London's own description of the protagonists' storytelling powers in *Martin Eden*. Of this autobiographical sailor-hobo London notes:

"He saw with wide eyes, and he could tell what he saw. He brought the pulsing sea before them; and the men and the ships upon the sea. He communicated his power of vision till they saw with his eyes what he had seen. He elected from the vast detail with an artist's touch, drawing movement so that his listeners surged with him on the flood of poetic eloquence, enthusiasm, and power."

In the Klondike. Similarly, he accepted the poetry-spouting, intellectual side of Wolf Larsen, tyrannical seal-hunting captain of *The Ghost in The Sea Wolf*, because London makes us believe so firmly in the details of life on board ship. The fast-moving opening with its realistic collision at sea, the later descriptions of seal slaughters, and London's technical mastery in describing the threatened slaughter's movements in heavy seas help to carry us through larger improbabilities. If this technique and *The Sea Wolf* in general owe much to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, let it be said that London was almost alone in 1904 in seeing and proclaiming Melville's greatness.

Like Melville before him, London possessed a facility for translating individual experience into universal fiction and made the most of a personal life of high adventure. He was born out of wedlock and raised in poverty; his early years in California were one of constant movement, delinquency, and hardship. At thirteen he was labouring fourteen hours a day in an Oakland cannery. By his twenty-second year he had been "Prince of the Oyster Pirates" on San Francisco Bay, an officer in the Pacific Fish Guard, a sailor before the mast, a lengthy seal-hunting voyage in the North Pacific, a member of "Coxey's Army" marching on Washington in protest during the depression of the early 1890s, a hobo riding the rails across America, a jailbird who had served time for vagrancy, and a gold prospector in the Alaskan Rush of 1898. Later, he would pose as a tramp in the slums of London to collect data for *The People of the Abyss*. He would also work as a war correspondent in the Russo-Japanese War in Korea, appear on the lecture circuit as a socialist speaker and political candidate, sail around the world in a small ketch of his own design, and build a model farm based on modern agricultural methods in Northern California.

All these experiences were converted into literary expression by London with immediacy and conviction. But this man of action and his expression leave a threofold problem for his biographer. First, one must ascertain the truth behind events that London was prone either to embellish or to hide. Second, one must discover the nature of the thinking man behind the facades of the adventurer, sailor, journalist, and farmer. This problem is far more difficult than one might first assume. London was a self-taught man of literature with many contradictory ideological views and a strong anti-intellectual and anti-academic streak. "It would be a good deed to break the heads of nine tenths of the English professors," roars Martin Eden at one point. Many critics, thinking of Waldo Frank and Ford Madox Ford—have looked to London's contradictions and excesses and have mistakenly relegated him to an intellectual nursery of sorts. Third, one must explain the mysterious collapse and death of London—the pattern of self-destruction that makes the success story of the man of action and popular writer a total lie.

Andrew Sinclair's *Jack* does effective service in sorting out most of the facts, and in explaining the intellectual make-up of the man, but falls well short in this third category as a final explanation of the writer. As Paris labor strikes at the end of his own earlier and more definitive biography, "Jack London still eludes us". Nevertheless, Sinclair's balanced perspective on biographical details is no mean achievement. We find that London's own account of his early life requires considerable qualification. Apparently, the only weapon of "The Prince of the Oyster Pirates" on his "dangerous" bay excursions was a table fork used just once to repel an amorous Grizzly Bear. We learn that most of London's active life in the Klondike was spent waging yams with others in quiet taverns. Sinclair uses these and other discrepancies to develop London's self-image as a self-proclaimed also handles with care and good judgment new information on

London's illegitimacy, his fear of venereal disease, his tolerant attitude towards homosexuality, and his use of drugs.

The treatment in *Jack* of London's intellectual contradictions shows a similar balance. London's Marxism, his racism, his devotion to the ideas of Herbert Spencer, his linguistic nationalism, his rampant individualism, his socialist zeal in a house-hold manner by servants all form impossible combinations that every critic and biographer has noted. Sinclair's contribution is to concentrate instead on London's own "lifelong obsession with making a coherent pattern out of the haphazard and the inconsistent." It is London's insistence that things must go together that attracts him to system-builders like Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx. "Work for a philosophy of life," asserts London in one revealing passage. "It does not hurt how wrong your philosophy of life may be so long as you have one and have it well." Occasionally, he even turned his ideological tensions to artistic advantage. "South of the Slot" presents one protagonist in the split personality of Fred Hammond, university professor and Big Bill Toits, hard-drinking labourer and radical organizer. The ensuing struggle for psychological supremacy reflects London's own ambivalence between social aspirations and working-class identification. While I cultivate new classes," wrote London, a social climber, "I hate to be out of grip with the old."

Against these contributions to an understanding of London, Jack unfortunately has its weaknesses. Sinclair's abuse of metaphor to convey authorial excitement and a sense of transition is the most irritating. The young London belongs to a "unbleeding family, blowing with the winds of failure." The unsuccessful gold prospector must learn to "pan out the glitter of his struggle, the gleam of some sort of victory over himself." He possesses "a mind as delicate as a wolfpack" for this task. In Sinclair's phrase, the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 "burn" the chip on London's shoulder by destroying the evidence of his deprived childhood. Comment on *The People of the Abyss* is followed by an abyss within London himself where he begins "not to gild the lily, but to flick red paint on his own wounds."

The failure of Jack to probe beneath the surface for the meaning of London's early collapse and death constitutes a more serious problem. Sinclair offers new information on London's many physical ailments and on his use of a variety of dangerous drugs to control pain. Always a hypochondriac, London suffered from an ever-increasing series of ills in his thirties, including chronic indigestion, yaws, dysentery, pyorrhea, headaches, pneumonia, malarial fever, contracted while in the South Seas, rheumatism, nephritis, and other kidney problems brought on by alcoholism and his unquenchable mercury treatments. Sinclair chronicles these growing difficulties in detail. Indeed, Jack wells constantly upon the evidence is vague or dubious. Early on, the struggling writer has worked so hard that his spine is "bent like a pipe-stem." A backache? By 1904, London has "crushed both knees and his right ankle in various tumbles" and once again "crippled" himself, wrenching his left ankle in a game. A sprain? Sinclair is far too loose with his descriptions here. He relies on London's own exaggeration in order to build an early thesis of physical decay to go with the latent evidence.

Of course, London's physical problems were only symptoms of a larger pattern of self-destruction that deserves much closer attention and explanation. Sinclair provides. Most of London's immediate ills can be traced directly to his failure to follow sound medical advice: concerning his alcoholism, poor diet, lack of exercise, and own harmful self-mutilations. More meaningful answers to London's collapse surely lie in his fascination with the theme of psychological disintegration throughout his fiction and in his intense self-hatred as a writer. London was a consummate master

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